

TITLE

**Self-reflection in privacy research on social network sites**

AUTHORS

**Ralf De Wolf**

Department of Media and Communication Studies  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Brussels, Belgium

**Ellen Vanderhoven**

Department of Education  
Ghent University  
Gent, Belgium

**Bettina Berendt**

Department of Computer Science  
KU Leuven  
Heverlee, Belgium

**Jo Pierson**

Department of Media and Communication Studies  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Brussels, Belgium

**Tammy Schellens**

Department of Education  
Ghent University  
Gent, Belgium

PRESENTER BIO

**Jo Pierson**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor on digital media use and innovation in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Faculty of Economic, Political and Social Sciences and Solvay Business School) in Belgium. He is also Senior Researcher and staff member at the research centre iMinds-SMIT (Studies on Media, Information and Telecommunication) since 1996, in charge of the research on privacy in social and ubiquitous media. He lectures on socio-economic issues relating to the information society, digital media marketing, and user empowerment in new media. (Contact: [jo.pierson@vub.ac.be](mailto:jo.pierson@vub.ac.be))

WORDS (ABSTRACT)

## ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of social media, in particular social network sites (SNS), has been a source of many privacy concerns. To mitigate these concerns and empower users, different forms of educational and technological solutions have been developed. Developing and evaluating such tools, however, cannot be considered a neutral process. Instead it is socially bound and interwoven with norms and values of the researchers.

The goal of the paper is to make the researchers' role transparent by highlighting five self-reflective questions when defining a privacy problem and developing solutions. To do this we draw on key lessons that were learned in an interdisciplinary four-year research project spanning various computational approaches, media and communication studies, sociology, educational studies, law, and behavioral economics. In the project we study and address security and privacy problems in SNS, with the aim of increasing users' awareness and control over their online information and underlining the responsibilities of service providers and third parties. Moreover, we develop and evaluate different sorts of privacy technologies, such as access control models, feedback and awareness tools and encryption tools, as well as educational packages. By highlighting different self-reflective questions during the research process, we argue, that it is possible to obtain the goal of making this research process more transparent.

The analysis is framed within the Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective. Instead of focusing on the technical features of technologies, STS articulates and analyzes how they are culturally and socially shaped. Specifically, in this paper, we focus on how privacy technologies and educational packages are shaped in the different steps of the research process. When developing solutions, we delineate two main stages: first one defines the problem for which one wants to develop a solution, and second one develops the solution. In both stages, different decisions need to be made. It is with regard to these decisions that we propose the different self-reflective questions. First, we discuss the defining of the privacy problem, pay attention to which actors are involved when defining the privacy problem and whether it is defined as a property or as a human right. Second, we focus on the solution for a problem defined earlier and discuss the issues related to increasing awareness and changing attitudes and behaviors. Finally, in the discussion, we propose a procedure, called "tool clinics", for further practical implementations of the proposed approach.